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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ATHENS 000273

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/25/2018  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [KIRF](#) [GR](#)  
SUBJECT: CONSTRUCTION BEGINS IN ANCIENT JEWISH CEMETERY

Classified By: Ambassador Daniel V. Speckhard  
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY  
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1. (C) Notwithstanding our long-standing advice to the contrary and assurances from the GOG to consult with us and the Thessaloniki Jewish Community, Greece has begun construction for a metro station in Thessaloniki in an area that falls within the ancient Jewish Cemetery. Ambassador Speckhard and DCM have separately underscored U.S. concerns with MFA Secretary General Agathocles. The Ambassador said we were surprised and disappointed that work had started on the project which has been the center of lengthy discussions between our two governments. Most significantly, we had understood that the GOG would consult closely with the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki -- who had been taken as much by surprise as the U.S. The Ambassador requested that the work stop until the issue was resolved. Agathocles responded that the GOG had determined it was "technically impossible" to change plans to move the metro entrance (which is within the ancient cemetery boundaries), and said the work could not stop. The GOG believes the dig will not disturb the cemetery and will invite a representative of the Jewish community to be present, and if they find any "problems" they will immediately stop work. Ambassador Speckhard met later with Agathocles to underscore the seriousness of the issue and to request that the GOG reach out "now" to the Jewish Community. Agathocles said the GOG would do so. End Summary.

2. (C) On February 26, Ambassador Speckhard spoke with MFA Secretary General (SecGen) Agathocles immediately after

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receiving reports that construction had begun in Thessaloniki within the area identified as belonging to the ancient Jewish cemetery. We have had a long dialogue with the MFA reflecting the concerns of American and local NGOs that construction of a metro station in the area of the cemetery was troubling. Throughout our conversations, Agathocles assured U.S. interlocutors that the MFA would closely monitor all developments of the construction project and keep us advised as to any developments. We specifically requested consideration of moving the proposed entrance of the metro station to the opposite side of the street to steer clear of the cemetery; Agathocles had agreed that the GoG would consider that proposal.

3. (C) When asked what had happened, Agathocles said that the GoG determined it was "technically impossible" to change the plans. Per Agathocles, the area of the cemetery cannot be by-passed because it will be the main station near the University, and the GoG cannot move the entrance to the other side of the street because it would require taking down two buildings or removing thirty percent of the street. Agathocles said that the GoG does not believe that the

digging will disturb the cemetery, and added that the GoG would welcome a representative of the Jewish community being present 24/7 to monitor digging. He concluded by assuring the Ambassador that if, at any point, the GoG determines that there are remains where they are working, then work would stop immediately. He said, however, that the GoG was "nearly 100 percent convinced" that this will not be the case.

¶4. (C) Ambassador Speckhard said we were "shocked and surprised" by the fact that the GoG had taken action on an issue that had been the subject of several sensitive conversations without any prior notice to the Jewish community in Thessaloniki or the Embassy. More significantly, we had understood that the GoG would consult closely with the Jewish community of Thessaloniki on this matter, and its leadership had been taken by surprise as well. We do not believe it advisable for the GoG to start digging and then make adjustments on the basis of what is found. Greece, in particular, should be sensitive to the cultural issues surrounding digging for public projects. He told Agathocles that we do not accept the response that it is technically impossible to alter the plans. The Ambassador asked Agathocles for the work to cease until the issue could be resolved.

¶5. (C) Agathocles responded that he could not stop the work. Work needed to proceed to avoid financial penalties. He conceded that while technical adjustments to the project were still "theoretically possible," he explained that the cost was prohibitive and suggested that it could run as high as 20 million dollars and require knocking down two buildings to place the metro entrance on the other side of the street (Note: We understand that there might be other, significantly less costly options, that were also feasible. End Note.) Agathocles stressed that the GoG believed it was doing everything it could to work with the Jewish community

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of Thessaloniki and that it was an acceptable solution to have a member of that community present for the excavation. Ambassador Speckhard reiterated it was a mistake to move ahead with construction without resolving this issue with the Jewish community. He said that he believed adjustments were still possible and that they could and should be made to ensure that there was no disturbance to the historic cemetery.

¶6. (C) In a later 2/26 meeting with Agathocles, Ambassador Speckhard reiterated our concerns, and emphasized the importance of keeping the Jewish community of Thessaloniki informed and involved in the GoG's activities. Agathocles said that Deputy Foreign Minister Kassimis will be in touch with representatives of the community tomorrow.  
SPECKHARD